Extent of drug trafficking via FedEx and its rivals is unknown

By Wayne Risher

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It didn't surprise former U.S. Customs investigator Jamie Haase that a drug trafficker testified in federal court about cocaine sent from Mexico into the U.S. via FedEx.

Haase said the FedEx Express world hub in Memphis, which handles about 1.5 million packages on a typical night, just doesn't have enough people, drug dogs and detection gear to catch everything.

"The sheer volume of packages that goes through there makes it a win-win for drug traffickers," said Haase, who works in loss prevention in Greenville, S.C., and advocates for a group that favors liberalization of drug laws.

"Only a small percentage of cargo is getting flagged for inspection."

It's unclear how much narcotics traffic moves to and around the United States through air cargo carriers like FedEx and UPS, but it's presumed to be substantial.

"I think it's an unknown number, and I think it is huge. I don't think it's all international, either. It's domestic, too. From California, where (medical) marijuana is legal, they're shipping all over the country," he said.

In the U.S. District Court trial in Memphis, trafficker-turned-witness Orlando Pride, testifying against former associates in the Craig Petties crime organization, said they loaded 200 kilograms of cocaine in a coffin-sized box in Mexico and shipped it by FedEx across the border for distribution in Memphis and the South. Pride said there were 45 FedEx shipments valued at more than $4 million each.

Pride's testimony raised questions about what air cargo carriers are doing to stem the flow of illegal drugs and how much of the nation's illegal drug trade is moved by the same networks that support e-commerce and bring us iPods from China.

It was the latest drug investigation with a FedEx connection. In 2010, a Korean crime gang was accused of smugglingmethamphetamines from Mexico to Korea by FedEx. In 2009, the son of actor Michael Douglas was charged with shipping meth by FedEx from California to New York.
The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration's National Drug Threat Assessment for 2010 said drug traffickers' use of air cargo was declining in favor of land shipments across the Southwest border.

"The amount of drugs smuggled into the United States by couriers and in cargo aboard commercial aircraft is significantly less than the amount smuggled by other means," the report said.

Commercial air conveyances in 2009, the report said, accounted for 24 percent of heroin seizures, 15 percent of ecstasy, 6 percent of cocaine, and less than 1 percent each of methamphetamine and marijuana.

The next drug threat assessment report, issued last year, did not include details about air conveyances.

The U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency, a unit of the Department of Homeland Security, has inspectors stationed at the Memphis FedEx hub.

Nationally, Customs seized nearly 5 million pounds of narcotics in fiscal 2011 and 4.14 million the year before. Customs in fiscal 2010 processed nearly 334,000 flights with cargo and screened more than 57 million regular and express air waybill records.

An agency spokeswoman, citing the ongoing trial, declined to discuss drug enforcement efforts at the Memphis airport and FedEx hub.

Spokesmen at FedEx and rival UPS, citing the sensitive subject, declined to discuss cargo screening aimed at rooting out contraband.

Chris Stanley at FedEx and Norman Black at UPS said both companies require shippers to follow all applicable laws.

Stanley said, "We've got some very highly trained personnel in our security team. We've got different layers of security that packages go through. I can't talk about the specifics of those. We do cooperate with authorities in investigations and searches. Because of what it is, I can't divulge much more than that."

He added, "We do not tolerate the use of our system to ship illegal things of any kind, including drugs."

A Customs news release dated last July 15 provided a glimpse into the inner-workings of the FedEx hub in Indianapolis, the company's No. 2 hub in the U.S. It said Customs agents intercepted 99,253 illegal drug paraphernalia items there in the fiscal year that began Oct. 1, 2010.

It quoted a regional field director as saying, "Using cutting-edge tools and technology such as narcotics detector dogs, X-rays, data systems, radiation detection units and other consignment hub methods, CBP officers working at this facility have been able to constantly adapt to outsmart the smugglers and detect inbound contraband like illegal drug paraphernalia."

http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2012/feb/19/carriers-on-alert-to-illegal-cargo/?pr... 2/19/2012
Haase said Customs officers and security personnel use sophisticated intelligence and technology tools to identify suspicious packages and set them aside for closer examination.

"The mass volume is too much to handle," he said. "They can put new procedures in place and catch what they can catch. It's going to be very minuscule, and it makes you wonder if it's going to be worth it."

One of his assignments was going undercover in Baltimore to make a delivery of heroin that had passed through the Memphis hub, he said.

Haase said he left the U.S. Immigration and Customers Enforcement agency, the investigative arm of Customs and Border Protection, last year. He has become a designated spokesman for Law Enforcement Against Prohibition, a group of former lawmen who advocate liberalized drug laws.

Brandon Fried, executive director of the Airforwarders Association and cargo security expert, said people who facilitate imports and exports have been focused primarily on keeping explosives off planes, but he believes heightened security awareness helps curb drug flows too.

"The visibility is high on air cargo, a lot of procedures are in place, and walking off the street and giving a package to an air freight company is just not done any more," he said.

"I personally have been to the FedEx hub in Memphis. I have seen the sniffer dogs. Are they going to catch everything, when they've got millions of packages transiting through the hub? No. But I imagine FedEx and UPS are doing everything they can to work with the DEA and other agencies."

"Obviously, we are focusing on explosives. I'm assuming they're focusing on the drugs as well. It's a challenge for the cargo carriers."

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